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The origins of the Second World War

Focus questions

- ◆ What impact did the First World War have on the origins of the Second World War?
- ◆ What role did the Great Depression play in destabilising international affairs?
- ◆ How important was ideology in the conflict between nations during the 1930s?
- ◆ Was Hitler primarily to blame for the outbreak of the Second World War?
- ◆ What part did the policy of appeasement play in the origins of the Second World War?

Significant dates

- 1933 *January* Hitler comes to power in Germany
October Germany leaves the League of Nations
- 1934 *January* Germany signs non-aggression pact with Poland
- 1935 *March* Hitler announces German rearmament
April Stresa Front, signed by Britain, France and Italy, pledges to halt unilateral breaches of international treaties
June Anglo-German naval agreement is signed
- 1935 *October* Italy invades Abyssinia
- 1936 *March* German troops march into the Rhineland
July Spanish Civil War breaks out
October Rome–Berlin Axis is signed
- 1937 *May* Neville Chamberlain, pledged to follow a 'policy of appeasement' towards Germany and Italy, becomes British prime minister
- 1938 *March* Germany occupies Austria
September Munich agreement ratifies German take-over of the Sudetenland area of Czechoslovakia
- 1939 *March* Germany occupies Czechoslovakia
May Pact of Steel is signed between Germany and Italy
August Nazi–Soviet pact is signed
1 September Germany invades Poland
3 September Britain and France declare war on Germany

Overview

On 3 September 1939, Britain and France declared war on Germany. Ever since, the causes of the Second World War have been the subject of endless debate. The war came as a result of a military attack by Nazi Germany on Poland on 1 September 1939, but this was part of a build-up of tension in European relations during the 1930s. It is possible to view the outbreak of war by reference to short-term events in 1939, but the idea that such a momentous conflict was due to a short-term crisis ignores the deep-seated problems out of which the war emerged.

In discussing the origins of the Second World War, we must look at long-term causes, which are often called origins. It is these long-term factors which help to create the disputes and conflicts which later create a crisis which develops into war. They provide the background to the short-term causes, in particular the major events which were decisive in the actual outbreak of war. We must also examine the key leaders who took the decisions to go to war and evaluate their policies.

What impact did the First World War have on the origins of the Second World War?

One of the most important long-term factors in the outbreak of the Second World War was the impact of the First World War. The war left a legacy of economic problems, most notably a collapse of world trade, high unemployment, agricultural depression, war debts, unstable currencies and hyper-inflation. Few people wanted a repetition of a conflict which had killed so many people. As a result, there was great disenchantment with the use of force in international relations. This public mood greatly influenced the peacemakers who met in Paris in 1919 with the intention of creating a settlement which would help to prevent war in future.

The Paris peace settlement and its consequences

The Paris peace settlement of 1919 has been viewed as a major cause of the Second World War. It has been claimed that the peace settlement failed to solve the problems which had caused the First World War and created new problems which encouraged the outbreak of a second major conflict. Of course, we can now see the magnitude of the task facing the peacemakers. The leaders of the countries which drafted the peace settlement – Britain, France, the USA and Italy – did want to prevent a future war, not bring one about. Even so, major errors were made. Within 20 years, Europe was back at war.

The Treaty of Versailles

The Treaty of Versailles has been singled out as the most glaring failure of the peace settlement. The peacemakers viewed German militarism as the chief cause of the war, and they decided a number of precautions were needed to prevent a German military revival. The Germans considered the Versailles treaty as very unjust. Of course, we can now see that they were being completely unrealistic in expecting a more lenient settlement. It seems the German people expected a peace treaty which punished them very little. Perhaps the real problem with the Treaty of Versailles was not its harshness but its underlying leniency. It did not rule out a German military revival. Indeed, the creation of a number of small and weak independent powers in eastern Europe left Germany in a very good position to dominate that region once again, if it could shake off the military restrictions imposed at Versailles.

The League of Nations

The second key failure of the 1919 peace settlement was the League of Nations. The idea was for the League to act as an arbitrator in disputes between nations, and to provide collective security in the event of military aggression. The League, on paper at least, had the power to impose economic sanctions and, if they failed, to threaten an aggressor with collective military action by all its members. It seemed a good idea at the time. The burden of keeping the peace was to be shared by all nations. It was believed the League would end the selfish diplomacy of nation-states. But these ideas were completely untested in the hard-faced world of international relations. The League could work effectively only if it had the support of all the world's great powers. But the USA was not a member – and when the League was called upon to deal with military aggression during the 1930s it proved completely ineffective.

In 1931, Japan invaded Manchuria, but the League failed to act. It took no action when Italy invaded Abyssinia in 1935. It also proved unable to prevent Germany from rearming, and did not prevent the Spanish Civil War, which broke out in 1936. By 1938, the League of Nations had ceased to be an effective international peacekeeper. It was to play no significant role in the key events which led to war. The collapse of the League left international relations in a state of confusion in the late 1930s, a confusion which Hitler exploited.

Identify two major weaknesses of the League of Nations.

What role did the Great Depression play in destabilising international affairs?

The role of the Great Depression in encouraging international instability must be considered when evaluating the causes of the Second World War. It was

triggered by the collapse of the Wall Street stock market in October 1929. It was followed by the most prolonged economic depression of the twentieth century. The most damaging consequences of the depression were felt in Germany. It was in the midst of the depression that Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party rose to become the largest party in Germany, which greatly aided Hitler's accession to office in 1933.

It is very important to recognise the significance of the Great Depression on the unstable international relations of the 1930s. The optimism for peace in the 1920s gave way to the self-preservation of the 'hungry' 1930s. The depression plunged the free market into a major crisis. Most countries adopted protectionism and turned inwards to deal with social and economic problems. Democratic government was also challenged by new dynamic totalitarian regimes, with state-run economies, ruled by charismatic dictators such as Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini and Franco. In comparison, democratic leaders looked dull and ineffective.

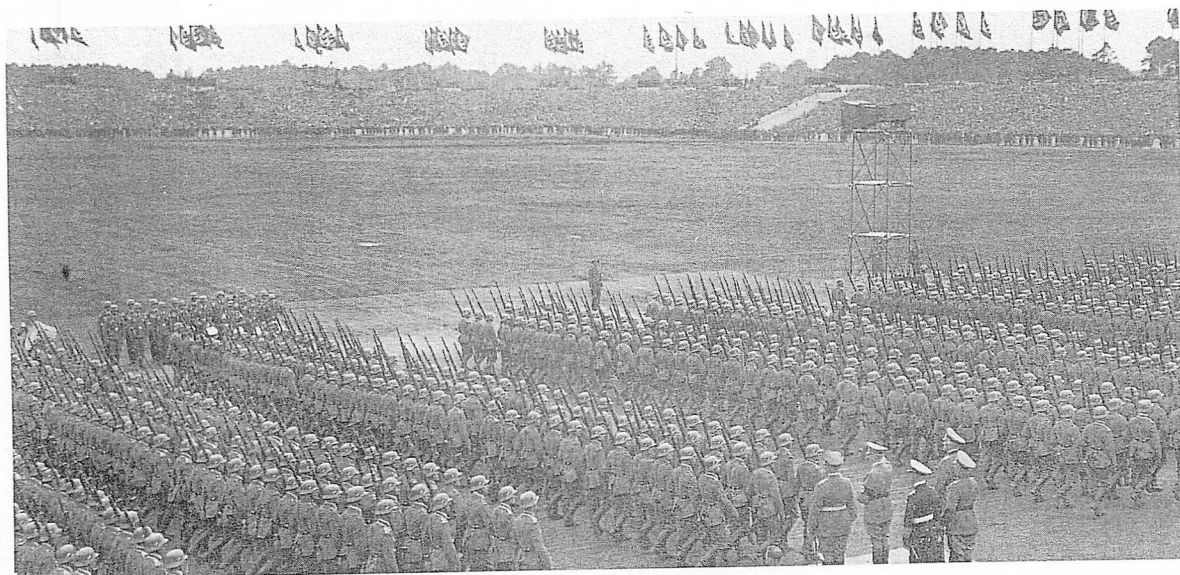
How important was ideology in the conflict between nations during the 1930s?

Ideology was another important ingredient in the causes of the Second World War. It is very tempting to view the 1930s as a period of intense ideological conflict which eventually produced a military conflict. The inter-war period saw the emergence of three very different ideologies.

- 1 Germany, Italy and Japan had regimes which expressed extreme nationalist ideologies that supported military aggression and increased arms spending.
- 2 The Soviet Union (modern-day Russia) was led by supporters of Marxist-Leninist ideas, who had spoken of the need for a world-wide revolution of the workers.
- 3 Britain, France and the USA had democratic regimes and free elections – and foreign policies which favoured peace.

These deep ideological differences made international co-operation very difficult. Each power was often pulling in a different direction. If a key cause of war is a breakdown of diplomacy, then the differing ideologies of the great powers during the 1930s clearly made a major contribution to the outbreak of the war.

The real question in assessing the role of ideology is deciding which ideology was the most disruptive to international harmony. The real troublemakers – or warmongers – in Europe were Germany and Italy, and in the Far East Japan, which also had a nationalist regime. Yet, as we have already seen, Mussolini's foreign policy was not pure aggression, but was based on cold-blooded calculations of national self-interest. Mussolini was a disruptive force in the



Hitler at a mass rally in Nuremberg demonstrating the military might of Nazi Germany.

mid-1930s, especially in ordering the invasion of Abyssinia, which greatly undermined the League of Nations, but Mussolini played a conciliatory role during the Czech crisis of 1938, and in September 1939 he did not go to war alongside Nazi Germany, even though he had a military pact with Hitler.

The chief troublemaker in Europe was unquestionably Adolf Hitler and his Nazi ideology. Nazism was projected as the will of a single individual in charge of a strong military state. It is difficult to understand why Hitler was spending so much money on armaments when he had no need to, unless war was a key aim of his foreign policy.

Briefly outline the major features of the competing ideologies in Europe in the inter-war period.

Was Hitler primarily to blame for the outbreak of the Second World War?

The chief cause of the Second World War was, therefore, the foreign policy objectives of Adolf Hitler. Hitler was determined to ensure that the peace settlement of 1919 collapsed. Indeed, if the politicians in Britain and France had been as determined to uphold the peace settlement as strongly as Hitler was determined to destroy it, then there may never have been a Second World War. Unless Hitler was prepared to halt German expansion voluntarily – and to enter into some new negotiated settlement of German grievances – then war was fairly certain to break out at some point in the late 1930s.

Indeed, the Second World War might have happened much earlier than September 1939 as Hitler moved step by step to overturn the peace settlement of 1919. He withdrew Germany from the League of Nations in 1933, announced German rearmament in 1935, sent German troops into the Rhineland in 1936,



Map 3. The territorial expansion of Nazi Germany, 1936-39.

brought Austria into Germany in 1938, threatened war over Czechoslovakia in 1938 and – though he signed the Munich agreement in the same year – occupied that country in March 1939.

What Hitler did by these actions was to build up tension in Europe to boiling point. His opponents were constantly being faced with a stark choice – capitulate to Hitler's demands or fight a war to stop him. In March 1939, when Hitler occupied Czechoslovakia, it was clear his actions were certainly leading in the direction of dominating Europe by force. The only question left when Hitler threatened Poland in 1939 was not what would Hitler do but what would Britain and France do to stop him. In September 1939, Poland decided to fight, and Britain and France declared war. Force became the only option left because Hitler would not negotiate on equal terms with any other power.

Hence, in order to explain why war ultimately broke out in September 1939, the role of Hitler is crucial. There is abundant evidence to show that all the major decisions on foreign policy in Germany were taken by Hitler and this makes his aims vitally important. These aims, as outlined in *Mein Kampf*, do represent a blueprint for action. The key aims of Hitler's foreign policy were:

- 1 to destroy the Treaty of Versailles;
- 2 to include all German-speakers in the Third Reich, especially those in Austria and Czechoslovakia;
- 3 to gain territory (*Lebensraum*, or living space) in eastern Europe at the expense of the Soviet Union;
- 4 to make Germany the most dominant power in Europe – a sort of super-power – and then probably make a bid for world domination.

It would be unwise – as A. J. P. Taylor once did – to dismiss Hitler's aims as 'coffee house dreaming'. On the contrary, they do amount to a framework for action, pursued as a set of objectives to be achieved stage by stage. When Hitler did compromise or improvise his aims – for example by signing the Munich agreement in 1938 or by signing the Nazi–Soviet pact with Stalin (his sworn ideological enemy) in 1939 – he did so for a tactical reason, and in both these cases he did not abandon his ultimate objectives, but rather only postponed them.

Evaluate briefly Hitler's role in the outbreak of the Second World War.

What part did the policy of appeasement play in the origins of the Second World War?

However, alongside the view that Hitler was the chief culprit in the outbreak of the Second World War lies a second explanation, which puts a great deal of the blame for the outbreak of war not exclusively on Hitler but also on **Neville Chamberlain** and the policy of **appeasement**. As Winston Churchill said in 1946, 'There was never a war in all history easier to prevent by timely action than the one which has just desolated great areas of the globe. It could have been prevented without firing a shot, but no one would listen.'

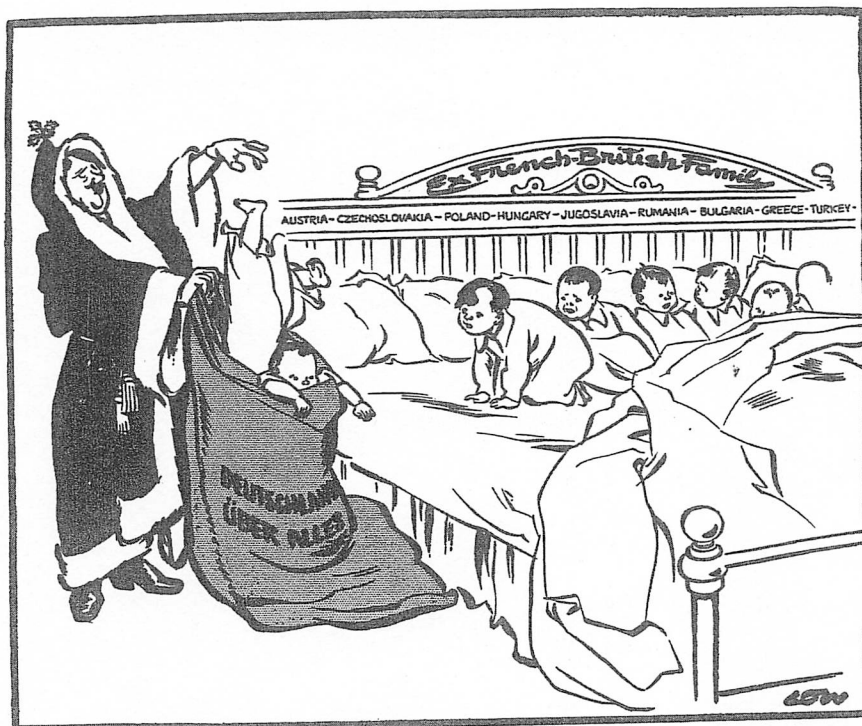
The aim of the policy of appeasement was to satisfy the grievances left behind by the Paris peace settlement in the hope that these concessions, brought about by negotiation, would satisfy Hitler and encourage him to live in peace and harmony with the rest of Europe. The most famous supporter of this policy was Neville Chamberlain, the British prime minister from 1937 to 1940, but the policy was also followed by the French government in the run-up to the war.

Of course, it is easy to blame Chamberlain and to see him as a selfish and deluded politician, but we must remember that successive British and French

Neville Chamberlain (1869–1940) was British prime minister from 1937 to 1940. Although he was a very successful chancellor of the exchequer from 1931 to 1937, who helped to guide Britain out of the depression, his reputation has always been tarnished by his association with the policy of appeasing Hitler, which failed to prevent the outbreak of the Second World War. In recent times, Chamberlain's poor reputation has been

revived somewhat by a number of revisionist historians who have suggested that, far from being taken in by Hitler, Chamberlain 'hoped for the best' but 'prepared for the worst' by sanctioning the building of the fighter aircraft which enabled Britain to prevent a Nazi invasion during the Battle of Britain. On the other hand, the policy of appeasement is still viewed (especially by the USA – the most dominant military power) as not the best means of dealing with an obvious aggressor. Chamberlain died of cancer in 1940 during the period when Britain stood alone against Nazi Germany.

Appeasement is a diplomatic policy which aims to settle grievances of nations by negotiation rather than military force. Appeasement is most closely associated with Neville Chamberlain's mission to pacify German grievances from 1937 to 1939. Ever since it has been defined as a policy stance taken from a position of military weakness when faced with a likely or obviously aggressive power.



"EUROPE CAN LOOK FORWARD TO A CHRISTMAS OF PEACE", SAYS HITLER

A David Low cartoon highlighting the outcome for Europe of the policy of appeasement.

governments from 1933 had done little to halt the march of aggression, nor taken steps to strengthen the power of the League of Nations. We can say the same thing about the USA, which followed a policy of isolationism in the 1930s.

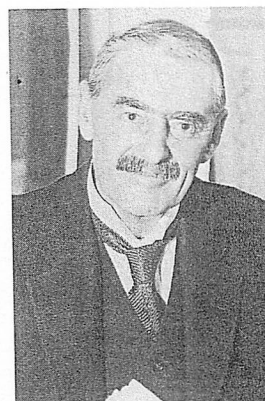
By 1937, when Chamberlain came to power, the USA, Germany, Italy and Japan had all left the League of Nations, and Chamberlain felt the organisation had no further role to play. There is little doubt that Chamberlain's personality – he was self-confident, obstinate and stubborn – did play a crucial part in the events which led to war. Chamberlain decided that the only way to sustain long-term peace was to get Germany, Italy and Japan to take part in a new general settlement of all outstanding issues – to be agreed and accepted by all sides.

But what Chamberlain did not want – and could not offer – was a free hand for Hitler to dominate central and eastern Europe. Yet these were the only terms that Hitler was willing to accept. Hence, the differing aims of Hitler and Chamberlain meant that the policy of appeasement was doomed to failure from the start, which must lead us to discuss why it was pursued for so long. Any consideration of appeasement must mention several factors.

- 1 There was a widespread horror of war in Britain and France.
- 2 Too much faith had been placed in the League of Nations.
- 3 There was a great deal of sympathy in Britain with the idea that Germany had been punished too harshly by the Treaty of Versailles, and the policy of appeasement was sympathetic to Hitler's desire to revise the treaty.
- 4 British public opinion constantly opposed rearmament.
- 5 The poor state of Britain's armed forces also encouraged the policy of appeasement.
- 6 The French had no real stomach for another war with Germany.
- 7 There was an ideological dislike of the Soviet Union, which meant that Chamberlain preferred doing business with Hitler to entering an alliance with Stalin.

It was an intermingling of all these factors which made Chamberlain follow appeasement, but it must be appreciated that Chamberlain pursued the policy almost like a religious fanatic. He would not contemplate any other.

Indeed, Chamberlain's attempts to find an alternative policy to appeasement after March 1939, when Hitler occupied Czechoslovakia, showed a distinct lack of judgement. He chose to offer a guarantee to Poland – a country Britain could not defend. Even more disastrous, he delayed signing an alliance with the Soviet Union in the summer of 1939, a delay which allowed Hitler to offer Stalin a pact which kept the Soviet Union out of the war in September 1939 and left the decision for war in the hands of the Polish government. Hence, the failed policy of appeasement served to illustrate the weakness of British and French resolve to resist Hitler, and was accompanied by errors of judgement which played a crucial role in the outbreak of the Second World War. Oddly enough, it was Chamberlain who declared war on Germany – not Hitler who declared war on Britain.



Neville Chamberlain
(1869–1940).

Identify the chief reasons why Chamberlain adopted a policy of appeasement.

Historical interpretation: the origins of the Second World War

The dominant interpretation of the origins of the Second World War was originally advanced by Hugh Trevor Roper, and supported by Alan Bullock. This holds that Hitler's views as outlined in *Mein Kampf*, which aimed to make Germany a major European power by gaining *Lebensraum* in eastern Europe by military force, were a blueprint for his foreign policy actions in power and led to an escalating crisis in the 1930s which eventually brought about the outbreak of the Second World War. This interpretation, although challenged by A. J. P. Taylor, who claimed that Hitler did not want a major European war to break out in 1939, remains the most dominant explanation.

Even so, the role of Neville Chamberlain and the policy of appeasement have come under scrutiny. Appeasement has been viewed as a 'diplomacy of illusion', which failed to appreciate that Hitler wanted to dominate Europe by force and was unappeasable. It has also been argued that a second fatal 'illusion' of Chamberlain was to negotiate with the Nazi dictator from a position of military weakness. As a result, appeasement is viewed by many historians as presenting Hitler with easy opportunities to advance German territorial aims in Europe, without providing Britain or France with any insurance against the possibility of further aggression. In more recent times, some 'revisionist' historians have sought to show the economic and military weaknesses which helped to guide Chamberlain's policy, but they have never proved that appeasement was a sensible policy to deal with the specific problems of Hitler's dynamic foreign policy. Indeed, a new group of 'post-revisionist' historians now argue that Chamberlain's strength of will helped to demolish alternative policies, which may have stopped Hitler, such as a military alliance between Britain, France and Russia. They also argue that Chamberlain encouraged Hitler to believe, when he attacked Poland in September 1939, that his 'spineless opponents' in Britain and France would not go to war to stop his military aggression. In essence, therefore, the Second World War broke out because of the dynamic foreign policy of Hitler and the diplomatic mistakes and weaknesses of his opponents.